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AUTHOR Paraschos, Manny; Boice, Ermalee
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine Americans' international news consumption. It was hypothesized that (1) television would be the preferred medium for international news; (2) the public would be satisfied with its preferred medium, although watchers more so than readers; (3) the majority of people who would claim that they know something about a particular international news item would actually know nothing about it; (4) knowledge of a particular foreign news item would have a stronger correlation with newspaper reading than television watching; and (5) the amount of exposure to international news (in either medium) would be significantly correlated with knowledge of news. Subjects were 278 American adults, telephoned randomly, who completed a questionnaire that focused on demographics, exposure to news, medium preference and satisfaction, and news item knowledge. The results supported all the hypotheses. The results raised the question of why newspaper readers knew significantly more about specific international news items when television was considered the most complete information communication medium and was preferred by the large majority of respondents. (HTH)

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Media Consumption and International News: A Case Study in News Exposure, Coverage Satisfaction and Knowledge

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By Manny Paraschos and Ermalee Boice
Department of Journalism
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

International Communication Division, AEJ National Convention, August 1985, Memphis, TN.

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Introduction

In the mid-seventies, as developments abroad occupied much of America's national attention, foreign news played a larger role in the news agendas of the nation's media. This emphasis, however, was hardly new. The Cold War era and that of Vietnam were two other major instances when America's news media and consumers were preoccupied with international news.

The nature, importance, treatment and impact of international news have been analyzed in several studies over the years. In the fifties, the International Press Institute,[1] the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,[2] and Barrett-Kimball[3] were some of the first significant efforts to quantify the various dimensions of international news.

In the sixties, Gerbner introduced the study of many qualitative variables,[4] Ostgaard,[5] and Galtung-Ruge[6] analyzed factors affecting international news flow and Robinson[7] discussed audience characteristics and behavior patterns as predictors of foreign news knowledge.

More qualitative studies appeared in the seventies, as Sande[8] and Hester[9] focused on dimensions of news worthiness, while others like Hicks-Gordon,[10] Robison-Sparks,[11] Lent,[12] and Gerbner-Marvanyi[13] comparatively content-analyzed foreign news in America and other countries. More theoretical news flow studies were done by Hester,[14] Robinson,[15] Schramm et. al.,[16] Sparks-Winter,[17] Nordestreng-Salomaa,[18] Pinch,[19] Tatarian,[20] and Rachty[21] all employing multi-national media analyses.

The most encompassing of the multi-national studies, however, seems to be the one undertaken in 1979 by the International Association for Mass Communication Research under the auspices of UNESCO. The study utilized scholars from countries of all continents and has yielded at least one major book[22] and several papers like those by Stevenson-Cole[23] and Weaver-Wilhoit[24] in the early eighties.

With the exception of a 1980 Paraschos-Vasquez[25] study which focused on the possible association of media use with foreign news familiarity none of the studies mentioned above concentrated on the audience's consumption habits of international news, their preferred medium, their satisfaction with foreign news coverage, the potential diffferences between watchers and readers in international news retention or knowledge and media use. This study will attempt to address these issues.

In particular, this study's research questions are:

1. How much exposure to general news and international news do people have?
2. What is their preferred medium for international news? Why?
3. Are they satisfied with their preferred medium's foreign news coverage (in quantity, quality and adequacy of information)?
4. Do people who "watch" know more or less than the people who "read" international news? If there is a difference, is it significant?

Hypotheses and Methodology

After reviewing the results of the studies referred to in the preceeding sections, we hypothesized the following:

1. Television will be the preferred medium for international news.
2. The public will be satisfied with its preferred medium's foreign news coverage and watchers will be more satisfied than readers.
3. The majority of the people who will claim that they know something about a particular international news item will, after probing, actually know nothing. There will be more watchers than readers in the latter group.
4. Knowledge of a particular foreign news item will

have a stronger correlation with newspaper reading than television watching.

5. The amount of exposure to international news (in either medium) will be significantly correlated with knowledge of news.

In order to test these hypotheses, a group of eight graduate journalism students attended three training sessions, familiarized themselves with the 36-question questionnaire developed by the authors and called a total of 631 numbers randomly selected from the city telephone directory. Of these numbers 164 were busy or produced no response in two non-consecutive attempts, 57 were no longer working numbers, 132 yielded people who declined to answer and 278 resulted in completed, usable questionnaires. The completion rate for all eligible numbers was 67.8 per cent. Each call lasted approximately 20 minutes and was made in the early evening hours.

The questionnaire had four major parts. The first part was devoted to the regular demographic questions of sex, age, education and employment. The second focused on the amount of exposure to general news and international news in days per week and in minutes per day. The third part inquired about the preferred medium for international news and the reasons why as well as about how satisfactory (in quality, quantity and adequacy) the preferred medium's

coverage of international news was. (Because there was an extremely small reference to other than local newspapers, that of USA Today, in particular, the analyses following are limited to three types of media: local newspapers, local television stations and national television networks).

The fourth part of the questionnaire included five major news items (from five different continents) which had been on the national news agenda prominently in the ten days preceeding the telephone calls. After the interviewer asked the subject if he/she had heard anything about the particular incident, the interviewee was probed to recall what he/she might remember about the incident. The interviewers had before them a list of the four most prominent "facts" surrounding the incident and a blank, "other" space in case the subject recalled a "fact" not listed. (The interviewers had thoroughly familiarized themselves with the news stories, both print and broadcast, at the training sessions.) The interviewers marked as many of the "facts" as the respondents would recall--no aid was given the respondents at all.

The five incidents chosen for this study were:

1. Iran-Iraq war (bombing of oil installations, bombing of third country ships, chemical warfare allegations and the reports on the waves of young Iranians going to the front line and their deaths);

2. Political change in Canada (Trudeau resignation, the Turner succession, Turning having been a former finance minister, differences between Turner and Trudeau in style and politics;
3. Nigerian political problems (Dikko was a political leader living in London; was drugged and put in a crate for Nigeria, Dikko was an allegedly corrupt former transportation minister, Dikko was opposed to the current military rulers of Nigeria);
4. India's Sikh problem (Sikh extremists hijacked India plane, it was taken to Pakistan, this was done to protest the killings of Sikhs by Indian forces at a religious shrine, namely the Golden Temple);
5. Bolivian president kidnapped (first popularly elected president in 18 years, coup was attempted, coup failed and president was freed).

It should be noted that each of the "facts" surrounding the incidents above were of equal value and the order in which they were listed was meaningless--the object was to see how many of them the subject could recall, not which ones. If the subject recalled nothing, a zero was recorded.

Findings

The sample's demographics (Table 1) show a predominance of female respondents, mostly under 40 years of age with at

least a high school education and a diverse employment background. The plurality of the respondents (39.9 per cent) were employed in professional or managerial jobs.

Table II shows that the most popular daily news medium was the local television station, which was referred to by more than three quarters (75.6 per cent) of our sample. The local newspapers were second in popularity, with 69.4 per cent and the national networks third with 67.5 per cent.

ABC and NBC and their local affiliates battled for first place (NBC had a slight edge) while CBS and its local affiliate came in a distant third in popularity among our sample members (Table II).

Table II also shows the amount of time our respondents spent daily reading/watching general and international news. More than half of the readers (53.7 per cent) spent 20 minutes to an hour reading general news, while almost two thirds of them (62.3 per cent) spent fewer than 10 minutes reading international news.

Almost half of the network watchers (48.9 per cent) spent 20-50 minutes watching news while considerably more than half (60.6 per cent) spent fewer than 20 minutes watching international news. More than half (54 per cent) of local station watchers spent thirty minutes or less watching news but almost two thirds of them (65 per cent) spent fewer than 10 minutes watching international news on the local

station news program.

Our first hypothesis was confirmed, as data in Table III show: television was chosen by 63.3 per cent of our respondents as their preferred medium for international news. The preferred network was ABC (32.3 per cent of our respondents), with CBS second (31 per cent) and NBC third (28.9 per cent). The sample's choices for international news coverage by a local station were the ABC and NBC affiliates with each getting 36.3 per cent of the preferences.

The most frequently given reasons for medium preference in international news coverage were:

newspapers--habit (31.2 per cent of respondents), thoroughness (20.6 per cent), format (6.4 per cent) and accuracy (5 per cent);

network--convenience (33.1 per cent), thoroughness (18.8 per cent), immediacy (8.1 per cent), and visuals (5.6 per cent).

local station--habit (26.5 per cent), reporter familiarity (24 per cent), thoroughness (19 per cent) and format (5 per cent).

The second hypothesis which deals with the audience's satisfaction with their preferred medium's international news coverage is confirmed, too, as Table IV shows. The vast majority of all three media consumers gave good or excellent marks to the quantity of coverage offered by their preferred

medium: 79.3 per cent of newspaper readers, 85.6 per cent of the network watchers and 75 per cent of the local station watchers. Similar preferences were registered on the question of quality of coverage by their preferred medium: 77.4 per cent of readers newsspaper, 86.4 per cent of the network watchers and 82.2 per cent of local station watchers thought their media were doing a good or excellent job.

The part of the second hypothesis, which predicted that more watchers than readers will be satisfied with the international coverage of their preferred medium, was not strongly confirmed by the data (Table IV). Although in all three satisfaction variables there were more watchers (83.8 per cent) than readers (80.3 per cent) who give their media positive marks, the differences are small and statistically insignificant (Table IV).

The third hypothesis, which said that most people who think they know something will end up recalling nothing, was confirmed, as data in Table V show. Although only about one third of the respondents said they knew something about the composite news item, at least three quarters of the sample could recall nothing about it. Percentages of those who knew individual "facts" and their preferred medium also support the hypothesis that there were more watchers than readers among those who knew no "facts."

Table VI continues to examine the relationship of

medium preference and knowledge by presenting the knowledgeable people loadings for each of the news items tested. The results show a statistically significant relationship of knowledge and medium preference in three of the five news items and on the composite, thus confirming the fourth hypothesis.

Finally, Table VII addresses the proposition of the fifth hypothesis, which said that there will be a significant correlation between amount of exposure to and knowledge of international news. Readers in five of the news items and watchers in three of the five confirmed the hypothesis.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our findings concerning all three aspects of the study, news consumption habits, satisfaction with international news coverage and knowledge of international news, must be viewed from the perspective that this sample was not well balanced demographically--the typical respondent was a woman, under 40, with at least a high school diploma and most likely employed in a white collar job.

One of the study's most interesting findings was the perception of networks' performance by their viewers: Not only were there more viewers spending more time on international news at the network level, but also these viewers turned out to be the most satisfied with their

preferred medium's coverage of international news. As the Satisfaction Index shows (Table IV), these viewers fell in considerably higher numbers on the positive side of the evaluation scales when compared to the consumers of newspapers and local stations who gave their preferred media almost identical evaluations.

Although the knowledge questions had their obvious limitations (arbitrary selection, not of catastrophic nature, not necessarily visual, not necessarily directly affecting the U.S., etc.), they yielded results very similar to those obtained in the Paraschos-Vasquez study of several years ago on another set of prominent international news items.[26] There, too, was a significant correlation between knowledge and medium preference.

Also similar was the finding that knowledge is significantly correlated with the amount of exposure to international news and that in both studies "high" exposure yielded "high" knowledge but there was a threshold beyond which "higher" exposure would not result in more knowledge.

One surprising finding was that although fewer viewers than readers claimed they knew something about the news items, more viewers than readers ended up actually knowing nothing. In either case, however, it has to be considered disheartening for foreign news editors and reporters that more than three quarters of the sample knew nothing about

the targeted news items.

As far as the specific news items are concerned, it was not surprising to find that most of the respondents (about 46 per cent) appeared to be knowledgeable on the Iran-Iraq war. This incident does possess the potential of affecting the U.S. and has the drama and visual angle of an exciting news story.

It was surprising, on the other hand, to find that the kidnapping of the democratically elected, new president of Bolivia, a country close to us, was known by the least number of our respondents (about 6 per cent). Also surprising was the small number of respondents (about one quarter) who knew something about the change in Canada's leadership.

The news items concerning Nigeria and India yielded similar and low numbers of knowledgeable people. Perhaps geographical distance and lack of a U.S. role in both incidents might have caused these large amounts of disinterest or uninformed respondents.

Perhaps the most puzzling question posed by the findings, however, is the following: Since television is considered the most complete information communication medium and since it was preferred by the large majority of our respondents, why was it that the newspaper readers knew significantly more about the tested news items?

Several plausible answers come to mind: It could be that the problem was endemic to the news items selected--perhaps for political, personal and other reasons these were not "interesting" news items.

Another reason might be found in the old argument of "superficiality" of television news. Perhaps most international news, or especially the items tested here, which played too quickly and were sandwiched between domestic news, a practice which, unlike the newspaper treatment options, might be robbing the story of some of its potential impact.

It could also be that those who are interested in international news are print oriented, thus giving newspapers the "benefit" of a specialized audience which might have skewed the knowledge findings toward newspapers.

Finally, it could be that the news choices (hour format to time and place of reading) available to a newspaper reader may not compare well with the forced "menu" and time/place of news provided by televisin and this freedom of choice to read what (as well as when or where or how) one likes combined with the actual effort required to do so may result in better retention by the readers, which may account for their rate of knowledge.

Future scholars should examine the complex dimensions of these explanations and their applicability to news in

general and international news in particular. Their findings will go a long way in determining the best communication avenues toward a better informed electorate, which is no small goal for any study in mass communication.

Footnotes

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"Problems of International Communication and the Free Flow of Information," Washington, D.C., 1979.

24 "Foreign News in Two U.S. Wire Serivces." Unpublished paper presented to the convention of AEJ, Boston, Mass., August 1980.

25 "Newspaper vs. Television: Levels of Awareness and Knowledge of Foreign News." Unpublished paper presented to the Southwest Symposium of Mass Communication at the University of Texas, Austin, October, 1980.

26 Ibid.

Table 1

Sample Demographics
(N=278)

	Percent
Sex	
Male	34.8
Female	65.2
	100.0
Age	
18-25	19.6
26-40	37.5
41-55	18.5
Over 55	24.4
	100.0
Highest Level Education Completed	
Grade School	2.6
Grade 9-11	7.0
High School	42.8
At least some college	47.6
	100.0
Occupation	
Professional, managerial	39.9
Clerical, sales, skilled	25.3
Unskilled, farm, labor	20.5
Retired, students, etc.	14.3
	100.0

Table II

Degree of Media Consumption
(In Percentages)

	Newspapers		Network*		Local Affiliates**	
Daily	69.4		67.5		75.6	
	News	Int.News				
0-10	5.4	62.2	10.5	39.9	7.2	65.0
10-20	20.5	21.9	10.9	20.7	12.6	16.8
20-30	21.6	8.6	26.8	20.7	34.2	13.9
30-40	16.9	2.9	18.8	10.0	22.0	2.9
40-50	5.8	.4	3.3	2.2	1.8	.4
50-60	9.4	1.8	9.8	3.0	5.1	.4
60-90	13.7	.4	9.4	3.0	12.3	.7
90-120	4.7	0	4.3	.4	3.6	0
120+	2.2	0	6.2	.4	.7	0

	Network	Network's Local Affiliate
*ABC	33.2	** 35.3
CBS	30.0	27.5
NBC	33.2	37.2
CNN	2.0	0
OTHER	1.6	0

Table III

Preferred Media for International News
(In Percentages)

NP=36.7% TV=63.3%

Most popular reasons given

Local Newspapers		Network*		Local Affiliates**	
31.2	Habit	33.1	Convenience	26.5	Habit
20.5	Thoroughness	18.8	Thoroughness	24.0	Reporter
6.4	Format	8.1	Immediacy	19.0	Thoroughness
5.0	Accuracy	5.6	Visual	5.0	Format

*ABC	32.3	**36.3
CBS	31.0	27.1
NBC	28.9	36.3
CNN	4.7	.3
OTHER	3.1	0

Table IV

Audience Satisfaction With Preferred Medium's

International News Coverage*

A. Quantity

	Exc.	Good	Fair	Poor
Newspaper (NP)	10.7	68.6	19.9	.7
Network (TV/NT)	20.2	65.4	13.2	1.1
Local Station (TV/ST)	11	64	18.4	6.6

B. Quality

NP	11.1	66.3	21.1	1.5
TV/NT	19.2	67.2	12.9	.7
TV/ST	10.1	72.1	14.5	3.3

C. Adequately Informed by:

	NP	TV/NT	TV/ST
Yes	84.4	89.8	84.2
No	15.6	10.2	15.8

D. Combined Satisfaction Averages (From A, B and C above)

	A (Exc.+Good)	B (Exc.+Good)	C (Adequate)	AVG.
NP	79.3	77.4	84.4	80.3
TV (NT+ST)	80.3	84.3	87	83.8

E. General Satisfaction Index

NP	80.3
TV/NT	87.2
TV/ST	80.4

*In percentages (N=278)

Table V

Claimed vs. Actual Knowledge and Preferred Medium*

	Claimed	Actual					
		0	1	2	3	4	5
NP	34.6	75.8	16	5.2	1.5	1.2	.22
TV	33.2	81.5	12.4	4.5	1.2	.12	.12

Percentages of Those Who Knew:

	1 or more "facts"	2 or more	3 or more	4 or more	5
NP	24.2	8.12	2.92	1.42	.22
TV	18.5	5.94	1.44	.24	.12
Ratios- NP/TV	1.30	1.36	2.02	5.91	1.83

*In percentages (N=278)

Table VI

Actual Knowledge and Preferred Medium
Per News Topic

	0		1		2		3		4		5		Total Knowledgeable		
	NP	TV	NP	TV	NP	TV	NP	TV	NP	TV	NP	TV	NP	TV	R*
Iran	45.3	62.2	40	28.7	7.4	5.5	2.1	2.4	4.2	.6	1.1	.6	54.7	37.8	.04**
Canada	69.5	76.2	11.6	10.4	14.7	12.2	3.2	1.2	1.1	0	0	0	30.5	23.8	.05**
Nigeria	85.3	89.6	12.6	7.9	1.1	2.4	1.1	0	0	0	0	0	14.7	10.4	.38
India	85.3	85.4	12.6	12.2	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.2	0	0	0	0	14.7	14.6	.43
Bolivia	93.7	94.5	3.2	3	2.1	1.2	0	1.2	1.1	0	0	0	6.3	5.4	.03**
												Composite=	24.2	18.4	.02*

*Pearson's R showing significance of correlation between preferred medium and knowledge.
**Statistically significant

Table VII

Pearson's R Correlations Between Knowledge
And Degree of Preferred Medium Consumption (per item)

	NP	TV
Iran	.001	.028
Canada	.006	.043
Nigeria	.027	.409*
India	.005	.042
Bolivia	.043	.172*

*not significant